

Bridging Anthropology and Literature through Indian Writing in English

Margarida Martins

ULICES – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

Bridging Anthropology and Literature through Indian Writing in English

Are literature and anthropology distinct fields of work? Why should we build a barrier that separates one discipline from the other? What are the risks and advantages of connecting the two? In a traditional and slightly reductive classification of these two disciplines one likes to consider anthropology as a science and literature as an art. An anthropologist when writing his or her ethnography provides an objective analysis and description of other cultures and their social interactions and practices. A writer creates characters, imaginary worlds and stories for his fiction. But from recent debates, a fact is that many anthropologists are willing to agree that these two disciplines are in fact closer than was formerly and academically accepted.

As someone initially trained in social or cultural anthropology, then turned to the study of literature, I have never quite managed to separate the two disciplines. When interpreting novels, anthropological theory always seems to interfere in my reading, and when researching through anthropologist's writing, I tend to find analogies in fiction. In my current field of research on Indian English literature and in the process of writing my thesis on the novels *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, I find my background in anthropology very helpful in the understanding of socio-cultural practices, linguistic patterns and in the depiction of tradition, identity and liminality. Just as I realize from my reading that these and other Indian English writers have greatly contributed to an understanding of important aspects of contemporary cultural Indian reality.

The main purpose of my paper therefore is to expand on my personal views on the relationship between these two disciplines and its importance in my own research. To do so, I rely mostly on anthropologists

who have written on the subject such as Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Paul Stoller and Amitav Ghosh who is both an anthropologist and an Indian writer. But also in my field of research, I have used the work of anthropologists such as for example, Margaret Mead for understanding generational differences and their attitudes towards cultural change, Mary Douglas for interpreting the body narrative, social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and David Harvey to analyze the sociology of urban and social spaces and practices, not to forget the importance of socio-linguistics in the novels I am working on.

In James Clifford's 1986 collection of essays *Writing Culture* he makes the polemic claims on the need to open up new spaces and possibilities for understanding anthropology. In the past, the study struggled to defend its place in the academy as a (social) science as opposed to an art. Literature, the art of fictional and figurative writing stood for everything that was not objective, factual or plainly written. But the difficulty in formally separating one discipline from another allied to the values of trespassing formal academic boundaries especially in the fields of social sciences and literature has altered certain established perceptions. "Ethnography is an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where "culture" is a newly problematic object of description and critique" (Clifford *Culture* 3).

Writers of fiction don't construct worlds from nothing. Ideas are born of personal experience, individual histories, observation, discourse, facts and social practices among other external input which compose the backbone of a story. But they then rely on internal processes such as memory, emotion, imagination, subjectivity and perception to reconstruct the world aesthetically through the text. The narrative therefore becomes the virtual space through which social practices and individual experience are rendered meaningful.

An ethnographer on the other hand, attempts to reconstructs social and cultural practices captured through interpretative observation as authentically as humanly possible. In the process of doing so, however, some emotional and subjective charge gets caught up in the act. As the anthropologist or ethnographer writes his text, some degree of the literary art will be present in his work. And this has been one of the main

arguments against considering anthropology a science. But according to anthropologist Paul Stoller in his Texas lecture “Writing for the Future” the successful work of an ethnographer relies on the vivid and honest portrayal or re-creation of three fundamental elements of human life: place, dialogue and character. He says ethnography “(In a sense, writing a text for the future) is as a whole, a combination of evocation of place, the sonorous representation of dialogue and the sensitive portrayal of character.”¹ In doing so, the anthropologist is creatively reformulating the world.

A writer too can never be totally disassociated from his social and cultural conditions. The sociology of human relations, of everyday life and its practice, and of the constantly evolving traditions is represented even though unconsciously in fiction. Society is constructed through text. When writing, writers are not only narrating the world, but also talking a little about themselves and about the cultural context and individual circumstances they are coming from. Narratives reveal truths about their authors and authors become participant “indigenous ethnographers”. Roy, being a political activist against the effects of capitalism and globalization on Indian society and economy depicts and denounces this in her novel. Jhumpa Lahiri, author of the 2003 novel *The Namesake* reveals the experiences of first and second generation Indian immigrant communities in the United States of which the author herself is a part of. Places, characters and dialogues are evoked, represented and portrayed as words and the text become livable spaces.

In the same way but shifting the focus to anthropology again, human relations and how they are expressed through social practices become the cultural and literary metaphors that lead to an understanding of everyday life. As ethnographers observe and make sense of social practices, they are involved in the decoding of cultural metaphors, but simultaneously responsible for the creation of literary metaphors through which cultural forms will be transported to the reader. In Cliffords words, “Literary processes — metaphor, figuration, narrative — affect the ways cultural

¹ (<http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/587>. Accessed: 29/04/2013)

phenomena are registered, from the first jotted “observations”, to the completed book, to the ways these configurations “make sense” in determined acts of reading.” (Clifford *Culture* 4)

So not only in the metaphors and imagery, descriptive passages evocative of place, character portrayal and dialogue, but also in how the reader will interpret these words according to individual circumstance and context, very close links can be found between anthropology and literature.

Cultural anthropology, as most critical theory, has evolved and undergone processes of transformation throughout the decades. The methodologies and functional practices have evolved since Structuralism, though even Levi Strauss, the father of modern anthropology wrote about the value of the story in his *Mythologiques*. What’s more, societies have undergone thorough changes with decolonization, post-colonialism and now even further as the result of migration, transnationalism, multiculturalism and further implicated by globalization. The more the world becomes aware of the changing nature and vulnerability of cultural forms, the more the anthropologist and the writer have to adapt to the reality of contemporary society. These movements and social changes have not only affected anthropology, but literature as well. So both fields each in its own more scientific or more artistic domains, needs to pose the question of how it is to adapt for a future socio-cultural context.

Paul Stoller asks how an anthropologist can write for the future. To do so, the scholar must break free of academic constraints, write a text that is timeless and that will engage the reader because of the personal qualities of the writing. Clifford Geertz makes the interesting and provocative claim that an anthropologist’s most powerful tool is his “in-wrought perception” which brings his work closer to literature than science.

Gaining some sort of entrée into various people’s ways of being in the world demands not only that you have a reasonably distinct sensibility but also that you know what sensibility is. This is not a job for the disembodied observer, and the methodologically overprepared need not apply. It is the encounter — sometimes the collision, occasionally an embrace, often a confusion and non-plus, a near miss — between your sense of how matters stand, how, as we say, things should go, and the sense of those whom you are

struggling to understand that provides the basis for whatever account of their lives you are able to give. (Clifford. "A Strange Romance" 29)

Likewise, James Clifford challenges the idea that anthropological writing has to be reduced to method, analysis and objective theory by stating that:

[T]his ideology has crumbled. [The essays in his book *Writing Culture*] see culture as composed of seriously contested codes and representations; they assume that the poetic and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes. They assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical. Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed artificial nature of cultural accounts. (Clifford, *Culture* 2)

In these anthropologists' view the main aim of the discipline and its effectiveness is not necessarily to produce abstract laws that define mankind or give us knowledge of "the other" from a distance, but to provide the reader with a full, engaging experience of another's existence, whether the subject is the next door neighbour, Yanomami or a Yanomami neighbour. So the text is not telling a story or a practice, but in fact, re-creating it, making it happen:

This mutation makes the test habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own "turns of phrases," etc., their own history; as do pedestrians, in the street they fill with the forests of their desires and goals. In the same way the users of social codes turn them into metaphors and ellipses of their own quests. (de Certeau, *Practice*: xxi-xxii)

So the anthropologist, like the writer of fiction will adapt what he is writing about to his own experience and the reader will further interpret the text.

The narrative is what Stoller calls “living material”. Life, as he says, “does not go in a straight line, from point A to point B, although many times our writing about life goes from point A to point B.”² Experience cannot be written about in a simple or straightforward way, especially when we are dealing with human social behaviour. Interpretative, subjective, creative or imaginative qualities are involved in the process. Furthermore, our memory and emotions are aroused as we are transported to another time, another place, a different reality which will never be perceived in the same way by two different people. So we are made aware of “the utility of literary modes for accomplishing what forms of conventional ethnography does not: injecting a personal, multi-vocal, creative, and emotional element into anthropological writing.”³ Literary practice provides the means by which anthropology can free itself from the constraints of purely empirical analysis to a more interpretative and habitable enterprise.

One further point on the fusion of the two disciplines is on the power that literature has to bring the private into the public, to make the invisible visible and to turn the no one into a someone, an anyone or in a more sociological sense, into an everyone; to give voice to the voiceless. New spaces for representation are opened up through the text just as new possibilities for cultural interpretation are made available. Anthropology too reveals silences and opens up new grounds for exploring human social behaviour and interaction.

The debate that I have been developing in this paper, stresses the importance of breaking down formerly established disciplinary boundaries to open up new discourses where creative and aesthetic practices work hand-in-hand with empirical strategies for exploring the world, its form and practices.

As I near the end of my discussion, I would like to quote Amitav Ghosh’s from an interview entitled: “Anthropology and Fiction”. Being a writer and trained anthropologist he emphasizes the value of bringing together the two disciplines together in his work. According to Amitav

² (<http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/587>. Accessed: 29/04/2013)

³ (<http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/587>. Accessed: 29/04/2013)

Ghosh and from the examples in his fiction, anthropologists and writers in their art and practice, and anthropology and literature as academic and creative fields, have only to benefit from each other:

The one most important thing I learnt from anthropology (especially fieldwork) was the art of observation: how to watch interactions between people, how to listen to conversations, how to look for hidden patterns. This has always stayed with me and has influenced everything I've done, especially my journalism. The other thing anthropology did for me was that it took my interest in language in new directions. I became very interested in linguistic anthropology and especially in sociolinguistics. These interests have also stayed with me and have greatly enriched my novels. (Stankiewicz, "Anthropology and Fiction" 541)

In conclusion, is "a theory of narration [is] indissociable from a theory of practices, as its condition, as well as its production?" (de Certeau, *Practice* 78) Fiction writing is an art which displays literary, imaginative, creative, visual, and linguistic as well as many other aesthetic qualities. But it is also a "practice" in that it is not only telling a story, but "making" it, just as anthropology through writing makes it possible for the reader to experience the life of another cultural group. In character description, the re-creation of dialogue, the construction of social interaction, and the depiction of cultural environments it is hard to separate literature from social experience and theory. Anthropology which is a study that aims at reconstructing the daily practices of cultural groups through writing inevitably relies on literary strategies. Literature and anthropology are indissociable in that they provide each other with the essential ingredients for the practice of both disciplines. To take the discussion a little further, this debate raises the interesting points that we have as much to learn about the world from fiction, as to accept the vulnerability and subjectivity of narrativity in scientific discourse. Perhaps "Narrativity haunts such discourses", in de Certeau's words, making it difficult to accept their objective qualities, but then again by succumbing to, in Geertz's words, the "strange romance" between anthropology and literature, new and valuable approaches to research, writing and social practices are born.

Works Cited

- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1984.
- Clifford, James; Marcus, George E. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1986.
- Geertz, Clifford. "A Strange Romance: Anthropology and Literature" *Profession* (2003): 28-36. Modern Language Association.
- Stankiewicz, Damien. "Anthropology and Fiction: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh." *Cultural Anthropology* 27.3 (2012): 535-541.
- Stoller, Paul. "Writing for the Future" (Public Lecture). *Sensorium Seminar Series: Anthropology and the Senses* (2012) University of Texas.

ABSTRACT

In his 2003 article, “A Strange Romance: Anthropology and Literature” Clifford Geertz discusses the relationship between these two disciplines. Geertz understands that anthropology cannot be solely based on a cold scientific analysis of people and customs as it is almost impossible to perform cultural interpretation absent of subjectivity. The anthropologist’s interpretation adds a touch of creativity to ethnography, bringing it closer to fictional narratives. He also points out the risk of anthropologists losing credibility and objectivity by allowing themselves this subjectivity.

The anthropologist uses his/her perspective and interpretation to construct a narrative. As every custom, ritual or tradition is charged with metaphor, symbolism, plot and other stylistic features of literature, it becomes subject to many possible readings and meanings through which other narratives are re-created.

For the purpose of this paper I am fundamentally concerned with exploring the “romance” between anthropology and literature from a theoretical perspective. In my thesis I will be further extending this theoretical reading in a more thorough analysis of the novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai as examples of narratives that bridge these two disciplines.

KEYWORDS

Anthropology; Literature; Narrative; Interpretation; Cultural Practice

RESUMO

Num artigo de 2003, “A Strange Romance: Anthropology and Literature” Clifford Geertz fala da relação entre a antropologia e a literatura. Geertz defende que a antropologia não pode ser baseada numa análise fria e científica de pessoas e costumes pois é impossível conseguir uma interpretação cultural com a total ou parcial ausência de subjectividade. Com a análise do antropólogo, uma etnografia transforma-se numa narrativa criativa que se assemelha à literatura. No entanto,

Geertz também alerta para o risco que antropólogos correm de perderem credibilidade e objectividade ao permitir-se essa liberdade de subjectividade.

A partir de uma interpretação, o antropólogo constrói uma narrativa. Todos os costumes, rituais e tradições estão carregados de metáforas, simbolismo, enredo e outros aspectos literários estando sujeitos a variadas e muitas interpretações a partir de qual outras narrativas são construídas.

Neste artigo vou explorar o “romance” entre a antropologia e a literatura a partir de uma análise teórica. Essa relação será estendida aos romances de Arundhati Roy e da Kiran Desai na minha tese como exemplos de narrativas que estabelecem a ligação entre estas duas disciplinas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Antropologia; literatura; narrativa; interpretação; práctica cultural
